

**News Release**  
**U.S. Department of Justice**  
*United States Attorney*  
*District of Rhode Island*



**August 18, 2004**



## **Pawtucket man is held in alleged "drugs-for guns" trade**

A federal Magistrate Judge has ordered **Benny Vasconcelos**, 21, of Pawtucket, held on federal weapons and drug-trafficking charges. Agents of the **Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives** (ATF) arrested Vasconcelos last week after he allegedly gave an undercover agent a half-ounce of crack cocaine in exchange for two handguns.

United States Attorney Robert Clark Corrente and Thomas Wlodyka, Acting Resident Agent in Charge of the Providence ATF Office, jointly announced a federal complaint, which was filed on August 12 in U.S. District Court, Providence. Following a detention hearing yesterday, Magistrate Judge David L. Martin ordered Vasconcelos detained.

According to an affidavit supporting the complaint, ATF agents began investigating Vasconcelos earlier this month after receiving information from **Pawtucket Police** that Vasconcelos was dealing in drugs and was interested in buying firearms. An undercover ATF agent contacted Vasconcelos and agreed to give him pistols in exchange for 1/4 ounce of crack cocaine for each gun. Vasconcelos told the agent he was interested in nine-millimeter, .40 caliber, .45 caliber and .50 caliber handguns.

On August 11, according to the affidavit, the undercover agent met with Vasconcelos at a restaurant on George Street in Pawtucket. In the restaurant parking lot, the agent showed

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Vasconcelos three nine-millimeter pistols that were in the trunk of the agent's car. According to the affidavit, Vasconcelos took two of the pistols and put a package containing approximately ½ ounce of crack cocaine in the trunk. A team of agents then moved in and arrested Vasconcelos.

The complaint charges Vasconcelos, of 289 Lonsdale Avenue, First Floor, with distributing crack cocaine and being a felon in possession of a firearm. The charges are felonies and therefore subject to review by a federal grand jury. A complaint is merely an accusation and a defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty in court.

The **ATF Firearms Trafficking and Violent Crimes Task Force** investigated the case as part of **Project Safe Neighborhoods**, a Department of Justice initiative against gun crimes. Under Project Safe Neighborhoods, the U.S. Attorney's Office, working with Providence Police, ATF, the Rhode Island Attorney General's Office, and other agencies, aggressively prosecutes federal firearms offenses in an effort to incarcerate those responsible for gun violence and deter others from committing gun crimes. Since 2001, federal firearms prosecutions in Rhode Island have more than doubled and have resulted in lengthy prison terms for gun offenders.

ATF agents and investigators from **Providence Police, Rhode Island State Police, Warwick Police**, and the **Rhode Island Attorney General's Office** are assigned to the Task Force. **Pawtucket Police** also contributed to the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Peter F. Neronha and Luis M. Matos are prosecuting the case.

-30-

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